

Summer Vacation Is No Longer Necessary

Year-Round Schools, 2008

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The summer vacation is a remnant of an earlier, mainly agricultural America when children were needed to help their families work on farms. Those days are long gone, and the school year should reflect the realities of 21st-century family life and the demands of a changing economy. Low-income, minority children do not benefit from a three-month summer vacation and its accompanying learning loss. They are better off attending classes during the summer instead of wasting time at home or on the streets. Their parents would also be freed from the burden of finding suitable day-care or activities for them. There are many groups that want to retain the long summer break, however. These include some teacher unions and the summer activity industry such as amusement parks, summer camps, and resorts. The states should pass laws that restrict the permissible school year.

Can our kids afford to take summer vacation? Right now [July 2006], about 50 million children are on summer vacation across the United States. Many are discovering new interests at summer camp, playing ball at the Y, or traveling with Mom and Dad. But millions of others are loitering in parking lots and shopping malls, cruising iffy websites, and slouching toward academic disaster. For this second group, it's time to take a fresh look at the traditional summer break.

Summer vacation once made good sense—back when we lived in a brawn-based economy, academic achievement mattered less, an absence of air conditioning or modern hygiene turned crowded schools into health risks, and children had moms who were home every day.

Historian Kenneth Gold has noted that summer vacation, as we know it, was an invention of the mid-19th-century belief that "too much schooling impaired a child's and a teacher's health." Community leaders fretted that summer was a "period of epidemics, and most fruitful of diseases generally," and sought to keep children at home or send them to the countryside.

In that era, the nation's first professional educators believed that too much schooling would exhaust both teacher and student. They thought that placid summers under parental supervision would be more beneficial than time spent in humid, crowded schools.

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The Current Reality

Today, things have changed. We know that, for today's children, knowledge and academic skills will be critical to their future success and happiness. In many communities, children are safer in well-run schools than they are at home alone.

Other advanced nations don't provide an American-style summer vacation. Most industrialized nations offer no more than seven consecutive weeks of vacation. Meanwhile, American school districts offer up to thirteen.

In a long-gone world of plentiful manufacturing jobs and self-contained economies, such comparisons mattered less. Today, however, our children will find themselves competing with peers from Europe, India, and China for lucrative and rewarding brain-based jobs.

Summer vacation can also be a massive inconvenience for today's middle-class families. In the 1960s, reports the Population Resource Center, more than 60% of families consisted of a father working out of the house, a stay-at-home mother, and multiple children. Now, as U.S. Census data show, two-thirds of American children live in households where two parents work or with a single working parent, meaning no one is home to supervise children during the summer. For these families, summer vacation can be more an obstacle than a break. Parents must find ways to occupy their children's time and to monitor their socializing and web usage from work.

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The Urban Institute reports that, at most, just 30% of school-aged children in families with an employed primary caretaker are cared for by a parent during the summer. The Urban Institute study also notes that 41% of working families with school-age children pay for child care during the summer, typically spending about 8% of their summertime earnings. Meanwhile, expensive school facilities, computers, texts, and transportation sit idle.

Summer Vacation and Low-Income Kids

But the biggest problem with summer vacation today may be its impact on the academic achievement of low-income kids. In scores of studies, researchers—including scholars at places like the Johns Hopkins Center for Summer Learning and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory—have reported that these students lose significant academic ground in the summertime, while their more advantaged peers—those more likely to read and attend pricey summer camps—do not.

This has been a big factor in aggravating the "achievement gap" for urban and minority children. Programs with extended school years have had much success in boosting the achievement of these kids. The widely praised KIPP Academies, for instance, have employed a lengthened school year and a mandatory 3-4 week summer school session to boost achievement among their predominantly minority and urban students.

Today, "modified-calendar" schools exist in 46 states but enroll barely two million kids—about 5% of all K-12 students. Why aren't more schools offering an extended academic calendar?

One fierce opponent is the "summer activity industry." The nation's golf courses, amusement parks, and beachside resorts depend heavily on a cheap teen workforce. Movie theaters want teens with spending money, and the summer camp industry depends on families needing a place for their kids.

Additional schooling should not be an invitation to drudgery or an attack on childhood.

Teachers unions, too, are reluctant to see the school year extended. Efforts to add even two or three days to the academic year typically provoke objections from teachers and angry opposition from union officials.

What Should Be Done

Let's be clear: This is not a "national problem" or a uniform one. Summer vacations are still a wonderful time for many families and communities. Legislators need not pursue one-size-fits-all solutions to "fix" the school calendar.

Rather, it's time to acknowledge that 19th-century school practices may be a poor fit for many of today's families. It should be much easier for interested families to find schools that operate into or through the summer.

State officials should strike down laws—often supported by the summer recreation industry—that restrict the permissible school year for most schools. They should also help provide the operational funds necessary to support schools that operate through the summer.

School boards and superintendents should encourage more of their schools to move in this direction and appropriately compensate teachers and staff. Extending the school year will have the added benefit of helping to make teaching a full-time, more lucrative profession for educators who choose to work in these schools.

Additional schooling should not be an invitation to drudgery or an attack on childhood. It would allow schools to include more recess and athletics throughout the year, give teachers more time to conduct rich and imaginative lessons, and provide more time for music and the arts—all without compromising academic instruction.

Summer vacation can be a grand thing. But in the 21st century, for many children and families, it may also be an anachronism.

Further Readings

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